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Other Journeys

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Phillip Dross was a writer. He was forty-three years of age when he died of AIDS in January 1987. Four years earlier, he had come to Newburyport, Massachusetts, to live and to face hard realities about himself — the legacy of a painful, confusing childhood in Florida, where he grew up, bouts with alcoholism, and his own shortcomings as a writer, for although he drove his friends to distraction talking about writing, he could not endure long hours alone, especially at the typewriter.

He made progress — the slow, plodding progress that characterizes the struggle within oneself that can be resolved only within oneself. And then, the diagnosis of HIV infection brought him face to face with new realities and the final confrontation with self.

Ironically, his writing was never better. Stripped both of the need for and the diversion of pretense, of the excesses that often mar the work of writers who seduce themselves with the sheer abundance of their own talents, he developed clarity, economy, and a pristine, almost fastidious, sense of the sufficient.

The disease spread rapidly. Months before the end he could no longer hold a pen or use a typewriter, and finally he lost the ability to speak.

But, of course, he still speaks . . .

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21 September 1985

I would call this the first day of winter. Yesterday had the signs that today promised. A subtle quality I felt, certain summer was over. I only recognized two seasons, warm and cold. Fall is wonderful, crisp, clear, gloriously colorful, and cold. The air is dry, smelling of apples and manure, wildflowers and pine.

This clumsy drivel is without meaning.

Ever so slowly I become cognizant of what I'm supposed to be doing, aware gradually of just how I'm going to beat this disease. . . . The task looms larger every day and my faith in myself stays just ahead of the doubt. The magnitude of the change required daunts me, but the changes are long-time heart's desires. It's how I have wanted to change myself and couldn't figure a way. It is, in other words, a welcome challenge in many ways. I

These extracts from Phillip Dross's diary were compiled by his friend David Polando.

could have continued, would not have discovered, would not have learned, had the shock not been mortal.

I have AIDS. Can you imagine! I would have told you that I could imagine it once, but the reality has a quality beyond imagination. I guess nothing in recent history has so stirred the imagination as this disease has. The reaction in the general public seems to reach beyond reason in dark primal areas of fear. Suddenly one cannot avoid the subject. On television, radio, in newspapers and magazines, it is omnipresent. It took me about two months to absorb, to really fully comprehend, that they were talking to me when they said AIDS victim. I have developed a slurring in my speech which only now diminishes slightly, recurring when I am tired or speaking about it. I am still unable to write, my hand shakes uncontrollably. At the social security office I sat for an hour refusing to believe I couldn't fill out the forms, could not write my name! Relieved and rescued by a kind woman, or I might still be there utterly bewildered.

27 September 1985

Okay. I'm 42 years old. I have AIDS. I have no job. I do get $300.00 a month from social security and the state. I will soon receive $64.00 a month in food stamps. I am severely depressed. I cannot imagine how I will acquire even a part-time job off the books so as not to endanger my disability status. I cannot live on $300.00 a month. After $120.00 a month for rent and $120.00 a month for therapy, I am left with $60.00 for food and vitamins and other doctors and maybe acupuncture treatments and my share of the utilities and oil and wood for heat. I'm sure I've forgotten several expenses like a movie once in a while and newspaper or a book.

All this doesn't include my worry about the disease. I find that I tire easily, so a job is a mixed desire. My car is not very dependable either. It seems as if I am trapped in a dilemma, largely of my own making, from which I see no escape. I have determined that this writing down in black and white of my situation must at least lump it all together and provide perhaps a clue to the solution — there must be a solution — mustn't there?

I am still alive. Is it too late to reconstruct my life? How can I still live if I can't manage to afford life?

I wake up every day facing these things — trying to maintain the positive outlook I must have if I am to surmount this illness.

I never planned on this scenario.

I am rapidly running out of food, of vitamins, of money, of ideas, of hope.

3 October 1985

Today is schizophrenic, or rather I am schizo today, up one minute — way down the next. This phenomenon does give one the impression that there is movement, and that is some comfort. This morning I couldn't think why I should go on living and tonight I feel confident that I shall. Even the eleven o'clock news about AIDS doesn't get to me. The incessant coverage is a major trial to bear, but life has become all trial, with little or no recess. If checking out were easy — if one could lightly reject the quality of one's life — determining that it was insufficient, I would have done it weeks ago. It is not, however, easy. I still cannot figure out how to do it, so I suppose I'm not ready after all.

8 October 1985

Can't figure out why it's so hard to write. It was a shock to discover I hadn't written in all this time. How sad to waste the days like this. It's not like I have days to waste. I don't

seem to get depressed in the same way lately, or maybe I'm simply getting used to being depressed. I wake up dreading the days. They stretch before me empty and lonely, without meaning. The flavor is gone.

26 December 1985

Wan sunlight and slightly blue sky dress this bitterly cold day. This present approach to the typewriter has been even more fraught with dread than before, preceded by weeks of thought, anticipated with unspeakable fear and trembling. Events here evolve with unabated pace, though I can't fault their character.

On the physical front, I continue to feel rather good. The last blood tests were much improved. The cancer grows only slowly. Saturday I see my acupuncturist's teacher from England, reputed to be preeminent in the field. I continue to seek after a job, with some leads but no action.

My mental condition has improved somewhat, only more slowly than I had hoped.

January 1986

I am a pacifist at war with myself, a world at war, a man spending his life in self-destruction, a dog snarling at his own image on the surface of the water.

10 June 1986

Understanding what's happening is not easy. I have AIDS, the word terminal is associated with this condition, and not getting better is a new experience. When you have a cold you get better, a toothache, you have it attended to, this is a singularly different experience. The levels of my acceptance continue, and the closer I come to a real acceptance, the better it feels. There is a peacefulness associated with the simplicity imposed by the physical realities of the disease. I can't work anymore, so I'm home a lot, and alone, and free to contemplate the whole situation — not always a pleasant experience.

Last week I said to myself, "well as soon as I feel less tired, I'll write some of this down." The next day I realized I may not feel less tired, what then?

"I go to a gym three times or four times a week. I've never done drugs in my life, and the man that I thought was sitting home being as nice as I was was obviously doing other things, and he infected me. I went through a lot of things before they diagnosed me. I went through six months of biopsies, and I got cut up, and sliced up, and I got spinal taps 'cause I wasn't in the so-called high-risk category and that's something that I think is really important. They have to stop going on about high risk and low risk because I wouldn't have gotten sliced up and cut up and put to sleep and put in the hospital over and over again like I did had they just said, "These are your symptoms; this is what you might have, even though you're a white, middle-class female."